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Australian gay porn videos: the national identity of despised cultural objects.

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**Australian gay porn videos:
the national identity of despised cultural objects.**

Exnominated porn

The film is called *Brother Hustler* ('The resemblance is more than skin deep'). An advert precedes the main feature. As 'America the Brave' plays (Hammond-organ-style) and various iconic images are displayed (the stars and stripes; Abraham Lincoln's statue), a woman's voice intones:

Here in the United States, we're going through a difficult time for personal rights. The Federal government and a number of states have passed new laws pertaining to the censorship of adult material ... ultimately this form of censorship goes against our Bill of Rights, and the founding principles of this country ... vote for a free America. Only you, the people, can keep the American ideal intact.

Watching from within Australia, the 'America' of American gay porn videos is often exnominated. The national origin of these products is so predominant and familiar that it most often vanishes, leaving only 'gay porn videos'. But just occasionally – as with the advert preceding *Brother Hustlers* – the Americanness of these tapes breaks through. It becomes impossible to miss the particularly American inflection of these pornographic tapes – the right to watch anal sex, appealed to as a basic freedom, guaranteed by a Bill of Rights.

This tape draws my attention to the question of national identity and pornography. Porn tapes are not a genre obviously associated with projects of nation building. It also draws my attention to the question of American national identity in cultural objects: not often an object of study, so obviously is it exnominated as the all-powerful 'other' *against* which national projects must be undertaken (Cunningham and Turner, 1996: 5). American-ness is simultaneously always present in American texts, and so universal as to be often invisible.

With the question of national identity and despised cultural objects uppermost in my mind, I notice that here in Perth (Western Australia) my local video shop has begun to

stock a collection of gay British soft porn tapes. The productions of 'Pride' video, and the video versions of softcore magazines such as *Euroboy*, *Vulcan* and *Zipper* seem to me, watching from a distance, to be absolutely not Australian. Yet their 'Britishness' is not the same as the 'Americanness' of the introduction to *Brother Hustler* - simultaneously less explicit, and less exnominated. Unlike the American tapes, they do not have a confidence of a unified national identity which can be appealed to unproblematically. Unlike the quality 'Britishness' that informs Merchant Ivory's *Room with a View* (and its gay remake *Maurice*) and the upperclass queerness of Forster, Blunt, perhaps even Oscar Wilde, - all of these which mask 'Englishness' as Britishness - these cultural objects seem to me to be strangely fractured. The fact that X-Rated videos are illegal in the country makes things messy to start with. These tapes inhabit a strange netherworld (first explored by the ostensibly educational *Gay Men's Guide to Safer Sex* tapes) where they follow the letter of the obscenity law, while still showing anal sex between young men - curiously sanctioned by, and yet entirely flying in the face of, the 'establishment' of the British censorship apparatus. On top of this, the fact that *Euroboy* is one of the most successful of the ranges gay (not/)porn tapes produced in the UK is particularly odd. The explicit attempts to foster a sense of 'the European' in other cultural sites have been incredibly unsuccessful in recent years. Perhaps bizarrely, in British porn, it seems that a European identity is being quite successfully called upon - one of the few cultural sites where this is the case.

And then again, in these specifically British porn productions - such as the wonderful video magazines *Prowl* and *Zipper* - much of their Britishness seems to rely on an obsession with class, and the lure of the bovrer boy. As an expatriate Scot, currently residing in Australia, it seems clear to me that this a particularly *English* archetype rather than being 'British'. In these tapes, I see Europeanness, and I see Englishness. I see little Britishness.

With these objects calling my attention to the 'national' provenance of porn tapes, I find the Australian examples. A small collection of gay pornographic videos has been produced in Australia since 1990. Tapes such as *Jackaroos* (Bjorn, 1990) make Australianness visible in a way I don't recognise from either *Brother Hustler* or *Vulcan*. The way in which national identity is constructed in these despised cultural object seems

to me to be quite different from both the American version (where Americanness arises with confident bravado only very occasionally, because it is most often exnominated); and in British productions (where a national identity can certainly be traced, but is not made explicit). In contrast, these videos present a kind of 'desperate nationalism' which is different from either of these examples.

The reason that I find these examples fascinating is because it seems to me that questions about nation-building and cultural production are retaining their important place on the agenda of cultural studies: but the ways in which they are discussed are becoming increasingly reductive. The articulation of national identity to despised cultural objects strikes me as offering the possibility for much more interesting discussions than the approaches which currently predominate in our area. In this article, then, I want to look at how it might be possible to describe a national identity - Australianness - in ways different from those offered in the current paradigms - and why the anal sex of *Jackaroos* contributes to a national identity in quite different ways from that of either *Vulcan* or *Brother Hustler*.

Making nations

In recent cultural theory, debates about the 'globalisation' of culture - and a concomitant appeal to 'the local' - have ensured that questions of national identity remain firmly on the cultural studies agenda. The implications of this paradigm are interesting. It is perhaps surprising, in a critical climate which has celebrated the third space, the hybrid, and the deconstruction of simplistic national categories, that the binary of 'global'/'local' retains such an explanatory force in cultural studies. As an extension of 'cultural imperialism' theses familiar from earlier writing, a recent collection like *Global/Local* (Wilson and Dissanayake eds, 1996) demonstrates the continuing seductiveness of simple binary divisions as ways of understanding the functioning of cultural products. The use of the terms 'global' and 'local' in Wilson and Dissayanake's collection is telling: for neither of these is a geographical term. Rather, they function as code words. 'Global' is shorthand for 'Global capitalism'; and 'local' is an abbreviation for 'local resistance' (see, for example, Dirlik, 1996: 22, 28). In such a use of the term, the 'global' becomes

the site of faceless, homogenous cultural production (the 'McDonalds' theory of cultural production – Robertson, 1994); while the local is the site of *authenticity*.

Even as the political space of contemporary Hawaii ... undergoes a renewed struggle for indigenous sovereignty ... Oahu ... 'suffers the greatest number of tourists per square mile of any place on earth'. This indigenous pacific is deformed and troped, on a daily basis of mass-tourist banalization ... (Wilson and Dissayanake, 1996: 7)

The global is the site of the mass, the banal –familiar terms of the Frankfurt school for insulting large scale cultural production; its opposite is the local, celebrated by the writers in terms of *community*: 'indigenous community ... multicultural community ... [and] ethnic survival' (8). The communities here are apparently not those imagined by Anderson (1981) and explored by Hartley (1992, 1996) – the mediated and textualised communities which exist in an age of mass media – but *real* and *physical, authentic* communities.

This appeal to the real is unsurprising in one way: the writers in the Wilson and Dissanayake collection approach the question of cultural production from a Marxist perspective:

... the dominant note in this collection ... aims to unsettle the hybridity discourse normative to postcolonial analysis with trenchantly situated readings that stress enduring asymmetries of domination, class dynamics, and uneven spatial development (Wilson and Dissanayake, 1996: 8)

The refusal to celebrate a 'global' community which is homogenous, equally accessible to all citizens and a source of freedom for all, is, in my view, quite correct. But in continuing to employ the terms 'global' and 'local' to do so, these writers themselves paradoxically insist conceptualising 'global culture' in just such a homogenous way.

Is the 'local' the same as 'the national'? In the Wilson and Dissanayake collection, the terms wobble alarmingly. While Mike Featherstone explicitly asks, '[c]ould a nation be considered to be a local community?' (Featherstone, 1996: 52); other contributors to the collection write as though this were unproblematically the case (see, for example,

Yoshimoto 1996: 108). My feeling is that this is precisely part of the problem of the binary as it is currently formulated: for how large can a community be before it stops being 'authentic'? How could a nation - always an 'imagined community' - ever be authentic? It is for reasons such as this that I suggest that, in discussing the 'assymetries' of cultural production and circulation, we need far more sophisticated approaches than those which attempt to fit every cultural moment into either 'the global' or 'the local'.

In this, I agree with Stuart Cunningham and Elizabeth Jacka that the 'cultural imperialism' thesis which underlies the 'global/local' distinction is a problematic one (Cunningham and Jacka, 1996: 5-7). What I am interested in attempting in this paper is to enter debates about the national, in an attempt to find more useful ways to *locate* cultural products than that which places them within a binary of badglobal/goodlocal. Gay pornographic videos, as I will argue below, provide a useful approach to these questions, precisely because they make – and are widely understood to make - no claims to *authenticity*. Australian gay pornographic videos are interesting as the cultural product of a country which has been particularly determined in creating suitably 'national' cultural products - to the extent of legislating what counts as 'Australian content' in a text. In this, an analysis of the Australian situation should be taken as both representative and unique: representative in that it is one example of a country which is not-America seeking to combat the perceived threat of cultural imperialism by means of a strongly-promoted national-local; and unique in the sense that Australia has its own history of national identity and cultural produce which must be taken into account in any analysis of a nation-building cultural project.

Desperate nationalism

In 1988, Australia celebrated its Bicentennary: a celebration of two hundred years of European settlement/invasion of the country. The theme of this celebration was 'to find a national identity' (Schaffer, 1988: xi). 'Many books, television programs, historical recreations, articles and reports are being generated which attempt to define a national culture' (xi). The idea that Australia, as a young country (at least in its present form) is peculiarly desperate to define a national identity, is a common one in Australian studies (see Richard White, 1981; Graeme Turner, 1986). One attempt to create this 'national

identity' occurs in the work of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (formerly the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, formerly the Australian Broadcasting Control Board). This Government body nominally oversees broadcasting in Australia: but it retains, in fact, direct control over only two areas of broadcasting content: children's television; and 'Australian content'.

The point of this latter category is – explicitly – to: 'promote a sense of Australian identity'. This is done 'by ensuring television provides a reflection of Australian society' (ABA Annual report, 1995/1996: 50).

In fact, the 'Australian content' of broadcasting is largely conceived in terms of Australian authorship: relying on the presumption that the presence of Australian creative personnel will guarantee the Australian content of a program. However, in the case of 'a conflict about creative control' (Cunningham, 1992: 60), the ABA retains a set of textual features by which Australian content might be judged. These are organised in the following categories:

- Theme: subject matter pertains to aspects of life in Australia or of the life of an Australian or Australians
- Perspective: Subject matter is presented from an Australian viewpoint
- Language: Speech used by Australian characters is the speech, including idiom or accents, found among people who meet the definition of an Australian
- Character: Portrayal of Australian characters is recognisably Australian (Cunningham, 1992: 53)

The peak Government body for administering broadcasting in Australia exhibits the desperate nationalism of a search for a national identity. It is from here that I wish to set off on my quest for the national importance of Australian gay porn videos: by employing the categories of 'Australian content' developed by a government body; and by exploring the cracks opened up in these by the improbable conjunction of ABA guidelines and gay porn videos.

Quality porn?

Why should such a thought experiment be improbable?

Gay porn films have not, to my knowledge, ever been discussed in terms of national identity. This is not surprising - there is not much of a sample size of writing to choose from in the first place. Thomas Waugh's magisterial study of gay porn images, *Hard to Imagine* (1996) discusses photography and film from a variety of national contexts, without ever drawing attention to the country of origin, and not presenting any kind of argument that this might be relevant to his project. John Burger's *One Handed Histories* (1995) is an account of American gay porn, but makes no attempt to read his object of study in terms of its national context. Richard Fung and Kobena Mercer have both discussed gay male pornography in relation to race, but not nation (Fung, 1991; Mercer, 1991). Many discussions of gay porn take on traditional terms of feminist assessment in order to examine power relations in these pornographic texts in relation to gender rather than other issues (see, for example, Kendall, 1993; Beck, 1992; Stychin, 1992; Crawford, 1996; McKee, 1997).

The lack of articulation of gay porn to questions of national identity is not surprising. For, in the terms that debates around national cultural identity have been constructed, gay porn does not seem to have any place. National cultural identity has been constructed around, on one hand, 'the authentic'; and on the other, the best and the great. There has been much political economy writing in defence of national 'public spheres' (understood to be necessary for democratic function of culture, and to be threatened by the multinational ownership of media companies). Here, national public culture must be of a form related to 'public service broadcasting' - serious, informed, rational - something to make Habermas proud. There has also been writing in which national identity is identified with 'quality' production - the best of films and television programs. So, for example, there have never been 'Australian content' regulations for porn videos; for, in short, 'Australian content' applies to 'quality' production.

Individual programs scores are calculated by multiplying an 'Australian factor' by a 'quality factor' by the number of hours transmitted. The Australian factor is

determined by the amount of Australian involvement in the creative control of the program (ABT, 1992: 55)

John Docker notes that it is expensive drama production which is most often seen 'quality' production (1991). The ABA promotes the production of this material as being of central importance in promoting 'Australian content'. As Stuart Cunningham formulates this connection, 'Australian drama .. [is] arguably the most strategic material to regulate for [as] it is largely in drama that national audiences can see refracted back to them their own images, their own stories, their own recognisable concerns' (Cunningham, 1992: 53):

Of all types of television programs, drama is recognised, said the senators, as having the greatest sociological, psychological and emotional impact upon the audience. Drama is the most powerful weapon of all in its effects upon the moral standards of the community and in influencing its attitudes [this is] ... BBC-style programming ... [and] the British concept ... that programs should 'inform, educate and entertain' (Docker, 1991: 13, 12)

In Australian cinema, the art film was the genre which in the 1970s provided the major site for the concerted attempt to construct a national identity (Cunningham, 1985). In television, it is for the national soul of prime time drama that wars are waged. Meanwhile, in gay porn videos, Australian men are driving into the bush to spot kangaroos and fuck, largely unregarded. In attempting to move away from the terms in which debates about the formation of national identities - against the spectre of the bad 'global' with which we are familiar from cultural theory - it is useful to turn to those cultural objects which have never been within the purview of traditional debates.

Trying too hard

It is possible to make these cultural objects fit into the national project. However, even attempting to do so feels faintly ridiculous - for they simply do not fit into traditional nation-building projects.

- **Character: Portrayal of Australian characters is recognisably Australian**

Jackaroos (Kristen Bjorn, 1990) is an Australian gay porn video. 'Jackaroo is the Australian word for the men of the rugged outback down under', as the voice over declares. Throughout the video, individual scenes are introduced by just such declamatory voice overs; and they insist on the fact that this porn video fits directly into a tradition of Australian representation - the rugged outdoors men who roam the outback of the country, knowledgeable about 'bushcraft', and managing nature: 'Out in the bush, there are a few things which a bloke needs to know. He needs to know how to ride hard, how to shoot straight – and what to do when that big, fat snake strikes'. In short, *mateship* is at the centre of this video. And, in the categories of 'Australian content', this certainly marks *Jackaroos* as possessing 'characters [which are] recognisably Australian' - for mateship and the men of the outback have been centre in attempts to construct a mythic Australianness (see, for example, Schaffer, 1988: 4, 8).

Ironically, this archetypally Australian 'mateship' can be seen to have a strong homoerotic component:

[t]his largely takes the form of the consumption of large amounts of Fosters, preceded by shaking the cans, cracking them open and spraying the sultant foam over as many of the surrounding men as possible. As you can imagine, the girl doesn't get a look in edgewise. Moreover, the ejaculatory quality of the boy's beer cans as they open them clearly suggests the alternative that is so clearly present and so strongly repressed in the mythology of mateship (Thomas, 1996: 101)

In fact, *Jackaroos* is painfully faithful to the Australian character. The 'mate' is at the centre of both histories of Australian identity, and this gay porn video. In its careful attempts to stay within the discourse of traditional mateship, while showing gay sex, *Jackaroos* is so faithful to the homosociality of mateship that it completely perverts it.

A similar move to be faithful to 'Australian characters', even as they are perverted can be seen in the videos *Australian Sunsets 2: Jackaroos* (aka *Australian Jackaroos: the Legend Continues*) (Nick Brody, 1991) and *Manly Beach* (Kristen Bjorn, 1991).

Criterion 1: 'Character: Portrayal of Australian characters is recognisably Australian' (check)

- **Language: Speech used by Australian characters is the speech, including idiom or accents, found among people who meet the definition of an Australian**

The 'mate' of *Jackaroos* is a recurring lexical element in all of these videos: 'I want to give it to you, mate'; 'Pound it mate' 'Aw mate, I shot all over you. Yeah' (*Manly Beach*). Australian accents, idiom and vocabulary are the one element of Australian productions which can be identified relatively unproblematically. Their status in these videos is interesting.

In *Going Down Under* and *Australian Sunsets 2: Jackaroos* Australian voices are heard. They are recognisable voices of Australian gay men – those in the latter video in particular have an effeminate inflection familiar from the everyday spaces of Australian gay pubs and clubs. But the three other videos under consideration use the Australian accent in a noticeably different way. *Jackaroos*, *A Sailor in Sydney* and *Manly Beach* have a common production history which is important to note in these discussions of the 'Australianness' of gay porn videos.

All three of these videos are directed by Kristen Bjorn – not an Australian – and produced by Kristen Bjorn productions – not an Australian production company. They are financed by non-Australian capital, and any profits from them leave Australia. The stars of these videos are indeed Australian (including 'Foot long Sean', Australia's first gay porn star), and are shot and set in Australia, but their production history would probably rule them out of consideration for 'Australian content' under the industrially-oriented rules of the ABT. Meanwhile, in terms of global/local production, any committed writer would have to condemn the 'global' nature of these productions: their reliance on 'global capital', their lack of 'local authenticity'.

And yet, the 'accent' of these Bjorn videos is more insistently Australian than that of the videos funded and produced by Australian companies. A theme begins to emerge: the more 'global' these videos, the better they fit the rules for measuring textual 'Australian content'. While the videos produced by Australian companies present accent almost accidentally, the format of the Bjorn videos moves it to a central signifying position.

All three Bjorn videos feature dubbed voice tracks. This fact is insistent, unmissable, and the most obvious textual feature of 'Australianness' in these videos.

The dubbed voice-over is a standard feature of very low budget porn videos – and not just of those produced in a language other than English. The lack of 'direct sound' often stands as a marker of cheapness. However, this is not the case in the Bjorn videos. The Kristen Bjorn Australian gay porn videos have higher production values than the those produced by Australian companies– in terms of the bodies, looks and penile abilities of the stars (all markers of the expense of production), the quality of lighting, editing and so on. In short, the dubbed voice-over represents something else – not cheapness, but a particular kind of *desperate Australianness*.

It has already been noted that each of the scenes in these videos is introduced by a voice-over which places them in the context of traditionally 'Australian' scenarios – the bush, the outback – but what the voice over says is perhaps less important than *how* it is said. These voice-overs are all performed with extremely broad, deep, masculine Australian accents. Indeed, the accents are so broad that they are almost comic. The voice-overs do not just introduce the scenes however – they also dub the voices of the characters as they have sex; and the same voices dub every scene.

The insistence on these accented voices as the carriers of Australianness leads to another odd feature: the men in these videos talk *constantly* while they are having sex.

This is unusual. Most gay porn videos, having established the scenario, feature little speech beyond an isolated exclamation. In these Australian gay porn videos, the men keep talking all through the act. In this way, even though it may not always be obvious from visual signifiers that these are Australian – an Australian penis does not look immediately different from an American penis – Australianness is always present: so long as the men keep on talking. 'Stick it in my arse – strewth!' exclaims a character in *A Sailor in Sydney*, keeping the vernacular present as the sex progresses. The insistence on the vocabulary of the 'mate' can again be noted, as the continual conversation insists on inserting this recognisably 'Australian' terminology. 'C'mon mate, suck that dick', 'Strewth, yeh, suck it' (*Jackaroos*); 'Ah, mate, I shot all over you. Yeah' (*Manly Beach*).

Criterion 2: 'Language: Speech used by Australian characters is the speech, including idiom or accents, found among people who meet the definition of an Australian' (check).

- **Theme: subject matter pertains to aspects of life in Australia or of the life of an Australian or Australians**

Other aspects of 'Australianness' are equally desperate across both Bjorn and non-Bjorn productions.

i) landscape

Graeme Turner notes the: 'preference for the rural over the urban ... the thematic and physical domination of rural subjects and rural locations since film began in Australia' (Turner, 1986: 28). In promoting 'Australianness', Australian literature and film has laid great store on the landscape of continent (29). The landscape also features in these films as something that is recognisably – iconographically – 'Australian'. The cover of *Australian Sunsets 2: the Jackaroos* proclaims that the video is 'Set in some of Australia's most beautiful countryside', and the landscape does indeed take pride of place in many of the sex scenes in these videos. The opening shots of *Jackaroos* focus on countryside. The first shots are images of trees and the bush. The first sex scene of *Manly Beach* is shot against a spectacular landscape of bush, on a clifftop above the sea [INSERT HERE PICTURE OF TWO MEN HAVING SEX OVERLOOKING BEACH].

Similarly, there is a fascination with the Sydney Opera House in these videos: such that it even enters into the fucking scenes – those supposedly sacrosanct spaces which are the very *raison d'être* of these videos. In both *A Sailor in Sydney* and *Going Down Under*, sex scenes are set in apartments with picture windows overlooking the Opera House. And the two videos employ the same strategy for displaying this landmark [INSERT HERE PHOTO OF TWO MEN IN FRONT OF OPERA HOUSE]. In porn videos, zooms are a common textual feature – zooms into close-ups of penises, of anuses, of penetration, of sucking. And such zooms feature in these videos. But another kind of zoom also appears in both videos - zooms which look as though they are aiming for genitalia, but which swing off at the last moment to go out the window, behind the actors,

and focus on a close-up of the Opera House. This iconic element of the Australian urban landscape is equally as interesting, in the visual logic of these videos, as the gay sex which is supposedly their central attraction.

ii) wildlife

Certain elements of 'the Australian life' have been fetishised to the point where they stand independently of any external referent, to mark 'Australianness' immediately. The indigenous wildlife of Australia is an obvious example – the koala, the kangaroo, the emu, the duck-billed platypus. The names of the stars involved in these videos is interesting: 'Brumby Jack' is involved in *Jackaroos*, as is 'Dingo McGee'; the film also involves an appeal to the history of Australian popular culture, in the appearance of 'Hogan Maloney'; while 'Skip Simmons' appears in *A Sailor in Sydney* ('skip' being a derogatory term for a white Australian, developed from the television series *Skippy*, where the eponymous hero was a bush kangaroo).

The opening scene of *Jackaroos* is a fascinating one: it presents, in the manner of a tourist video, the 'desperate nationalism' of Australianness. Two men drive through the Australian countryside while a didgeridoo plays in the background. A bizarre series of shots ensue. The men stop the 4-wheel drive and point out of frame. A reverse shot answers – a kangaroo. Another shot of the men, pointing in a different direction (all the while, the didgeridoo plays). Another answering shot – a koala. Again, the men are shown looking. Again – an emu [INSERT HERE SERIES OF PHOTOS - FIRSTLY, TWO MEN IN CAR; THEN KANGAROO, KOALA, EMU]. By this point, the scene is becoming ridiculous, but it keeps pushing the boundaries of this excessive 'Australianness' – again, they look, again a reverse shot – a cockatoo. 'Each time we's go out bushwhackin'', says the deeply Australian voice over, 'we're always amazed at nature's wonders'. Indeed – to see all of these creatures surrounding one 4-wheel drive is wondrous.

iii) Aboriginality

Robert Hodge and Vijay Mishra suggest that indigeneity has often been a vital part of attempts to forge a sense of Australian national character (Hodge and Mishra, 1990). It is worth noting here that while these videos employ disembodied signifiers of indigeneity/Australianness (the didgeridoo which opens *Jackaroos*, along with the boomerang, a potent symbol taken up in the cause of national identity formation), indigenous people are entirely absent from them. This potential site of Australianness is not exploited in any of the Australian gay porn videos.

Criterion 3: 'Theme: subject matter pertains to aspects of life in Australia or of the life of an Australian or Australians' (check-ish).

- **Perspective: Subject matter is presented from an Australian viewpoint**

I have left this element to the last, because even in the sacrilegious mode with which I am working it is hard to see how this abstract element could be read in any cultural product. In the spirit of completeness, I offer only one thought.

Popular knowledge has it that the Australian accent can be explained with reference to a particularly physical feature of the country: Australians talk the way they do because they are trying not to open their mouths too much in case the flies get in.

From this point of view, one scene in one video can be read as particularly Australian. In *Manly Beach*, two characters are having sex in the bush. As they lie naked on the ground, they are encircled by flies. The insects occasionally land on their skin while they have sex. The invading fly is a familiar Australian character, well known from countryside interviews in news and current affairs programs, documentaries and lifestyle shows, where interviewees casually swat away the flies while they get on with something else (talking). Perhaps this is an Australian perspective on gay sex: just swat the flies away while you're doing it.

Criterion 4: 'Perspective: Subject matter is presented from an Australian viewpoint' (check-ish).

Locally global

It is possible to discuss these videos in terms of 'Australian content', even though they lend themselves poorly to such a project. However, I feel that in doing so, all I have shown is that the category of 'Australian content' is problematic - something which we already know (see Rowse and Moran, 1984). Those videos which are made by non-Australian directors and production companies are more textually 'Australian' than those which are not.

However, if we are seeking ways to discuss the location of cultural product, without accepting an easy relativism that everything is equally Australian (obviously it is not) - and without falling back in to the 'local/global' reliance on 'authenticity' - how do we go about it? I find that my own experience of gay porn films in the Australian context proves useful - precisely because the location of these texts, outside of the realm of traditional debates, makes it possible to see new ways of thinking about such questions.

Local boy made god

As I was thinking about this article, a series of events occurred.

Site number one: The Den, Oxford Street, Sydney (sex-on-premises venue). I have just had sex with a man. He is friendly, and, somewhat bizarrely, invites me to his boyfriend's birthday party. 'You might know him', he says. 'Have you seen *A Sailor in Sydney*? He was in that'.

Site number two: The Tool Shed, Oxford Street, Sydney ('adult' store). I have just bought their entire collection of Australian gay porn movies (all four of them) in order to research this article. The man behind the counter is friendly, and as he scans the videos through the till, he runs a quick commentary on their various merits. He comes to the last of them (*Going Down Under*) points at the boy on the cover and says, 'And you can have him any night of the week up the sauna. He goes with anyone'.

Site number three: Balmain, Sydney. I return to the house of the friend with whom I am staying, and proudly show him my purchases. He looks at the men on each of the covers

and says of one, 'He works down the Albury hotel, you know' (a local pub, in Darlinghurst, Sydney).

There is a difference between maps and territories.

[S]ubjectivity [can be understood as] formed within two sets of exterior relations, both external to individual subjects and their 'consciousness', both equally real. These two relations are the map and the territory upon which people locate themselves and form a sense of place. The territory is a set of social relations, a particular physical space of interactions, including relations of production and reproduction, places of habitation and work, public and private spaces ... Covering the same space as the territory is the map. Whereas people and their interactions fill the territory, broadcast areas, satellite footprints, telephone networks compose the map ... (Wark, 1994: 62, 63)

For me, gay orgies and sex between men with really great bodies have always been something like the streets of New York City. They exist only as fantasy spaces, divorced from the everyday to such a degree that it is impossible to imagine that, in any tangible sense, they exist at all. New York is the place where romantic comedies take place. I have tried to imagine myself walking down its streets, but I cannot. Of course, once I have visited, this sense will change. But for now, it is an impossible space, an Oz (in the Judy Garland sense) to which I can only aspire. I have been looking at maps of these acts, admiring the detail of their topographic splendour (such gradients! Such interesting local features!).

Now, suddenly, I was discovering that the fantasy space within which gay porn videos took place was not as detached as I had previously assumed it to be. For had I not just had sex with the boyfriend of a porn star? I was walking in the streets of New York City.

All of the Australian porn tapes that I have watched are linked - even if there are few textual features beyond those accents which bring them together; even if there is nothing in any of them which can be named authentically Australian. They are made in Australia. They all star Australians. This is not the distinction between the global and the local, between authenticity and inauthenticity. It is much more banal than that. What seems to me to be important about these videos is not the hats, the use of legendary

archetypes, or the number of koalas which can be counted in a given scene. It is rather the fact of proximity: Australia is a place where orgies can occur, and where the kinds of boys who take part in such orgies can live.

An immediate caveat is necessary: this proximity is an imaginary one. I am suggesting that what makes the videos local is the fact that they are produced within a space which I am imagine to be local. They occur within the nation within which I live.

And yet, living in Perth, Western Australia – the most isolated capital city in the world – Sydney is not my everyday, physical space (it is a four hour flight away – New York is not that much further). But it is within ‘my’ nation.

My experience of visiting Sydney – which was not going abroad, which did not require a passport, which lead to no major shift in the experience of the public sphere (access to many of the same television programs, newspapers, magazines, currency) was that it was easy to feel Sydney as part of the same nation – and to feel the pornography, which for it was physically local, as local to a nation. Perth and Sydney appear on weather maps together. In the everyday sites of nation building, Sydney and Perth are both parts of Australia, so I need not leave this nation in order to enter the territory of sexual fantasy.

These tapes are ‘local’ then only insofar as, in the current landscape of identities, we still understand the nation as a primary source of meaning about ourselves, and as a vitally important community. The difference between maps and territories, between the global and the local, is nothing about essential qualities, about authenticity or inauthenticity – it is merely about how well they currently work to demand our allegiance.

Persuasiveness

In short, I suggest that rather than talking of 'content' or 'authenticity', or even 'the local', a more useful vocabulary might be that of 'persuasiveness'. This is a rhetorical concept, not one of content. It functions discursively, depending on who is addressed and in which context. I find these tapes persuasive in convincing me that they are produced within the nation where I reside and belong (Probyn, 1996).

Which is to say that what makes these tapes Australian is not anything in their content but, indeed, the banal fact of their (recognisable) production within a nation to which citizens feel allegiance. This does not require any attempt to judge the authenticity of the nation to which that allegiance is called - indeed the term 'authenticity' does not really apply to nations. To attempt to do so is a category error. These porn videos offer nothing about being Australian other than the fact that they are made in something which is already called Australia. The nation, and affiliation to a nation, do not require any sense of what that nation actually *is*. There is nothing offered in these tapes which actually gives 'Australia, the nation' any distinct identity, or which would make me recognise it. And this is the revelation – that there does not need to be. The signifier of the nation can continue to work powerfully, even when it has no content – indeed, may be much the stronger for being so (it becomes radically inclusive, open enough to accept anything). Thus, everything that is made in Australia offers, at least potentially, the possibility of celebration, the strengthening of the nation, the feeling of belonging and of pride – simply because it is produced within this preexisting but empty category of the nation. Nothing that is produced within Australia is automatically any more Australian than anything else – every that is produced in Australia has to *potential* to be equally Australian: if its audience finds its appeal to their allegiance persuasive.

Which leads me to suspect, looking over these videos, that one of the things that makes the Australian situation a unique example of the current debates about the national, the global and the local, is the fact that the very desperation of these videos is part of what convinces me of their Australianness. We are a nation, as I noted at the start of this essay, whose youthful search for a tradeable identity has often appeared desperate. The stuffed koala bear held by the naked boy as he fucks in front of the opera house is scarcely more desperate than the sight of kookaburras on bicycles, circling giant kangaroos and Aboriginal dancers – Australia's attempt to construct itself on a world stage for the closing ceremony of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. It is the very desperation and inauthenticity of the nationalism which leads me to nod, with a wry smile, and slight embarrassment – yes, that's Australian. And, recognising the radical subjectiveness of a successful attempt to persuade a citizen of a text's national

provenance, what finally convinces me of the Australianness of these porn tapes is the fact that I have had sex with a pornstar's boyfriend.

Conclusion

This article stakes a claim in the debates about 'the global' and 'the local' in an international cultural studies. In this Marxist informed terminology - one which seems to hold an important, and indeed an increasing place in cultural studies which attempts to examine the increasing internationalisation ('globalisation') of cultural products - is implied the importance of understanding place and identity. At what point do we declare a cultural product to be 'local'? At what point do we understand it to have such an 'authenticity'? It seems to me that the equivocation in 'local/global' writers about whether the nation should be understood as a 'local' site draws attention precisely to the problem with these approaches to culture.

Is *Brother Hustler* authentically American? *Vulcan* authentically British? *Jackeroos* authentically Australian? It seems to me that the real advantage of studying despised cultural objects such as gay pornographic videos is that they simply do not fit such questions. They are the wrong questions to ask in these contexts. And, it seems to me, they are indeed the wrong questions to ask - in a more general sense. It is just that their inappropriateness is not always so evident if we restrict their use to those cultural objects with which we are more used to seeing them articulated.

The Australian gay porn tapes may not be 'authentic'. They match the criteria developed by the Australian television industry in order to measure the 'local' content of a program, but I am sure that they would fail the test of any self-respecting 'local/global' critic. They are, after all, produced by an overseas director, with overseas funding. Case closed.

But for me, to see gay porn with Australian accents, to see gay porn against a recognisable Australian backdrop – even to see gay porn which plays with archetypes of Australianness: to see such texts reassures me that it is not just New York which can sustain fantasy. Australia is a place where orgies can happen too. The function of the tapes as 'local' does not rely on their 'authenticity'.

This specific and limited case study has implications for more general current debates in international cultural studies. If we are interested in engaging with the debates which are currently raging about the threat of globalisation, and the importance of maintaining 'the local', then it is vital that we attempt to think beyond the reductive terms in which such debates are currently formulated. There is nothing 'authentic' about the local that is not 'authentic' about the global. If we believe that it is important to insist on local identities, whether at street, village, town, county, state or national level, we have to be able to argue why, without resorting to simplistic binaries. By looking at the persuasiveness of particular texts, and the functions served by the identities they promote, it is possible to attempt such a project. Australian gay porn videos provide us with one particular example through which we can attempt to think about the construction of the national, and the seductiveness of identities.

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